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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging the need for objective evaluation of the focus and organization of the basic speech communication course, this paper reviews the progress of the basic course by tracing its changes and development. The first portion of the paper discusses the evolution of the basic course from the 1950s to the present, giving specific attention to historical modifications in the basic course's orientation and focus. The second portion of the paper addresses questions concerning the current orientation, responsiveness, and appropriateness of the basic course, and reviews promising answers to these questions. (HTH)

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THE BASIC COURSE IN SPEECH COMMUNICATION: Past, present and future

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THE BASIC COURSE IN SPEECH COMMUNICATION: Past, present and future

For past fifty years a topic of concern for speech communication educators has been the discovery and implementation of a set of criteria adequately reflecting the most appropriate structure and function for the basic speech communication course. Historically, the basic speech communication course has revealed an adaptive nature intent on self-regulation and revision so as to meet simultaneously the needs of the educational institution and the needs of society (i.e., the student as a member of a community). Furthermore, the basic course in Speech Communication not only serves as a foundation for departmental curriculum, but also provides the necessary instruction in speech communication abilities requisite to the the core curriculum of many colleges and universities. Without the firm foundation provided by the basic course, the curriculum of speech communication departments would lack strength, purpose, and eventually, speech communication majors. Therefore, there is a need to objectively evaluate the focus and organization of the "basic course." In order to effectively investigate the orientation and structure of the basic course a survey of the course's evolution is necessary.

The purpose of this essay is to review the progress of the basic course in speech communication by tracing its changes and development. First, the evolution of the basic course from the 1950's to the presented is discussed, giving specific attention to historical modifications in the basic course's orientation and focus. Second, the current status of the basic speech communication course is presented. Questions concerning the current orientation, responsiveness, and appropriateness of the basic course are

addressed, and promising answers to these questions are reviewed.

EVOLUTION: COURSE ORIENTATION

From the 1950's to the 1980's the basic speech course has evolved to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society. In an early attempt aimed at characterizing the make-up of the basic speech communication course, Wright (1949) conducted a study of introductory speech courses, surveying 300 colleges and universities. This study revealed a definite fusion of speech and English. Oftentimes the basic course was contained within the English department and emphasized voice, composition, vocubulary, word selection, and fluency.

Oral Skills

In 1949, the postwar era, the country experienced great strides in industrial growth and technological advances. It was also a time for teenagers, free from concern about wars, to get a great deal of pleasure from a new invention, the radio. This new technology permitted the nation, as audience, to direct their collective attention on relatively few announcers, as speakers. This new fascination with extended listening greatly affected the nature of college speech training. The new "radio-oriented" society, quickly challenged the orientation to the basic course in speech communication that emphasized the primacy of the written word. The basic course began to shift its emphasis from writing skills to oral skills. In a government document from the United States Office of Education, John (1941) reported:

> The importance (of public speaking and dramatic art) has greatly increased within the last twenty years... partly because of changing social conditions which

> have tended to give youth more free time for various forms of self-expression, and because of the influence of the radio... The influence of the radion no doubt has been an important factor in stimulating public speaking and speech arts. College students of the present generation are doubtless the first to have the great opportunity of participating in a large and varied program of subjects relating to artistic expression (p. 3-4).

By 1950 many colleges had responded to the radio challenge and were teaching public speaking and effective expression of critical ideas. Palmquist (1950) empirically investigated this new trend toward an oral-orientation to the basic course. In a survey of fifty state- and city-supported colleges and universities, Palmquist discovered that only one out of fifty institutions offered a combined speech and English course which emphasized reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Respondents in Palmquist's investigation listed in descending order the six most important aspects of speech training: (1) effective public speaking, (2) the ability to think aloud, (3) the improvement of everyday speech for social purposes, (4) the development of bodily poise, (5) the cultivation of critical thinking skills, and (6) vocal control. The Western Speech Association convention of 1946, sensitive to the new trend of the course, proposed the following:

1. The student of the basic course should acquire an appreciation for the heritage of public speaking.

2. The course should provide skills training in public speaking.
3. The student should learn voice science, how and why the voice behaves.
4. The student should develop a freedom of expression from the course.
5. The course should help the student develop and integrate his/her own personality.
6. The course should serve as a composite skills introduction, basic to all subsequent course (Wright, 1949).

It is evident that the advent of the radio issued a challenge to society in the 50's. College and university speech departments responded to this challenge by shifting the focus of the basic course form an orientation emphasizing the written word to an orientation stressing the primacy of the spoken word.

The emphasis on oral skills as the primary component of the basic speech communication course continued throughout the 1950's. As evidenced by a survey of 318 institutions conducted by Jones (1955), the basic course orientation was biased in favor of speech fundamentals, public speaking, voice training, oral interpretation, and discussion. According to this survey, only one-sixth of the respondents continued to integrate written with oral skills in the basic speech communication course.

A study conducted by Hargis (1956) supported Jones' conclusions. Of the 249 colleges and universities surveyed by Hargis, 64% reported offering a public speaking orientation in their basic speech communication course, 19% reported an emphasis on speech fundamentals, and 5% stressed voice over other areas.

Fifty-one percent of these courses were titled "Fundamentals of Speech" or "Public Speaking."

Public Speaking

In the early and mid 60's the basic course, in response to societal needs, adopted a more specialized approach. Studies show that during this period the focus of the basic course shifted from an emphasis on general oral skills to an orientation stressing public speaking. In 1964 Dedmon and Frandsen surveyed 406 colleges and universities and received interesting descriptions of the basic course. Fifty-one percent of the reporting institutions described the basic course as "a practical public speaking course" (p. 33). A combined approach of public speaking, communication theory, fundamentals, and voice and diction was reported in 19% of the institutions. Only 12% of the responding institutions were still using an integrated written, oral, and listening skills approach to the basic course. Emphasis on theory was cited by 9% of the respondents, speech fundamentals were used by 6%, and voice and diction was cited as the principal component of the basic course by only 3% of the sample. Damon and Frandsen (1964) conclude that:

> A course in public speaking is by far the most frequently required first course in speech in colleges and universities in the United States. Communication theory courses have made only minor inroads into the popularity of public speaking as a required first course... (p. 37).

Multiple Approach

The decade of the 1960's was a time for analysis, introspection, reasoning, rationalization, free expression, and emotionalism. A key descriptor for this era is "self-expression." The motto of the 60's on such issues as war, poverty, civil rights, etc, seemed to be "Why?". People banded together in groups to denouce apathy and announce action; thus, the formation of major movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and organizations such as the Student Democratic Society. The news of the day was flooded with politics, war, and the social response to these topics on the college campuses and in the city streets. People of this nation exercised their freedom of expression to an unprecedented degree. How did higher education, specifically departments of speech communication, respond to this type of social change?

No longer could college students afford to speak out in an untrained fashion, relying on ideas developed in an unthoughtful manner. Society was voicing its views as never before; therefore, public speech training was at a premium. Eloquent speech was not the only requirement for effective speech. An effective speaker was characterized by the abilities to critically analyze, clearly arrange, and dramatically articulate ideas. This need for organized content as well as a polished, dynamic delivery coincides with the introduction of speech communication theory to speech communication training.

In a related research report, Dedmon (1965) supported the performance aspect of speech training, but argued for more cognitive theory in the content of the course, in that the first course must offer the student the underlying background and theory behind speech. These ideas grew and a theory emphasis was introduced to speech training.

in answer to the Speech Association of America's call for an investigation of the status of the basic communication course in an ever-changing college

environment, Gibson and colleagues conducted various basic course studies from 1968 through 1979. Each study cites changes in the epistomology and philosophy of the basic course. In their initial investigation, Gibson, Brooks, Gruner, and Petrie (1970) surveyed the instructional emphasis 564 colleges and universities on the basic speech communication course. The results of this initial study revealed that the basic course emphasized public speaking, but with a sizeable shift to a multiple approach of public speaking, speech fundamentals, communication theory, rhetorical criticism, and a career focus in activities such as interviewing. Seventy-five percent of the responding institutions titled their basic course, **"Public Speaking"** or **"Fundamentals of Speech."** During this period, the practice of including communication theory as an integrated part of the basic course became clear; however, the emphasis enjoyed by communication theory, when considering the components of a basic speech commmunication course, would not surpass nor equal the prominence afforded speaking skills.

Addressing the issue of the staffing of the basic course, Gibson et al. (1970) reported that in 4-year institutions full or associate professors were responsible for 74% of the basic course instruction, and assistant professors and graduate teaching assistants constituted the remaining 26% of instructors of the basic course. Two-year institutions reported virtually the same breakdown of resonsibilities as did the 4-year institutions.

The majority of the institutions sampled by Gibson et al. reported that the basic course enrollments paralleled those of the overall institution. A substantial number of schools (20%), however, indicated that the enrollment in the basic speech communication course was increasing at a faster rate than that of the total institution.

Five years after the Gibson et al. (1970) study, a second survey investigating the nature of the basic speech communication course was

conducted by Gibson, Gruner, & Kline (1974). Of the 554 institutions included in the second survey, 39% reported employing a hybred approach focusing on persuasive and informative speaking, audience analysis, development of reasoning skills, communication theory, and an introduction to interpersonal and small group comunication. According to Gibson et al. (1974):

> During the past five years there has been a shift toward the teaching of more communication-oriented and less public speaking-related material and activity; although some of the data indicate that the shift may be more in name than in actural practice. Courses may have been re-named or designated "communication" courses or courses reflecting a "multiple" approach because of the assumed attractiveness of the word "communication" (p. 213-214).

Further evidence of this trend toward a multiple approach to speech communication instruction can be found in more recently-published textbooks containing chapters concerned with the instruction of interviewing, conflict management, group discussion, and small group interaction. In addition, the staffing of the basic course also displayed some changes. Instruction of the basic course was no longer limited to senior faculty. Based on Gibson et al.'s (1974) sample, full professors were assigned the responsibility of instructing 21% of the basic course, associate professors acounted for 33% of the instructional duties, and assistant professors, instructors, and graduate teaching assistants assummed the responsibililty for 20%, 16%, and 10%, respectively.

By 1974, 24% of the reporting institutions had experienced faster growth in

the basic course enrollment than in the overall institution. Sixty-three percent reported that the basic course enrollment grew at the same pace as the institution's overall enrollment, and only 8% or the institutions reported that basic speech communication enrollments were increasing at a slower than overall rate (Gibson, et al., 1974).

Career Focus

In response to a changing society, Speech Communication education experienced an additional transformation in the 70's. In passive opposition to the fervor of the prior decade, the nation reacted by decelerating and pausing for thought. Children of the 60's were in constant search of a cause; in the 70's there seemed to be none. Society had evolved from a climate of outward expression to one of inward self-concern. Attention was no longer focused on the nation, or society, but rather, on the individual's goal-oriented interests. "Career" was the key word and the key motivator in a nation facing difficult economic times. Again, the pattern of colleges and universities responding sensitively to the needs of its constituents found no exception in the 70's.

A third study of the basic course was conducted by Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Hayes and Smythe (1980) reported a clear tendency for speech communication departments to shift the instructional orientation of the basic course to place more emphasis on communication theory and interpersonal concepts. The sample population for this study included 552 colleges and universities. Fifty-one percent of the reporting institutions offered a public speaking approach to the basic course; 40% offered a combined orientation of public speaking, communication theory, and interpersonal and small group communication. The interjection of interpersonal dynamics into the curriculum is an indicator and a forerunner to the development of interpersonal and organizational

communication as specialized areas. Work (1976) offers a rationale for a change in the orientation of the basic course.

> ... many in our profession feel we should be more concerned with the application of what we teach. In 1975, SCA: ERIC/RCS sponsored the publication of a state-of-the-art book by James McBath and David T. Burhan, Jr., Communication Education for Careers. While the authors' emphasis was on careers for speech communication majors, they also stressed the need to examine the usefulness of all that we teach--including what we teach in the basic course (p. 247).

Corresponding to this new career focus, several colleges and universities reported that enrollments for the basic speech communication course increased at a higher rate than the enrollment increases experienced by the university. The trend for increasing enrollments in the basic speech communication course indicated that the public was becoming more aware of the importance of speech communication training. The increasing number of sections taught is another example of higher eduction's continued sensitivity to the needs of society.

In the 60's, senior staff were assigned the heaviest amount of responsibility for instruction of the basic course. Full or associate professors were responsible for 74% of the basic course instruction. By the end of the 1970's, this trend had virtually reversed. Primarily junior faculty, assistant professors and instructors, were assuming the bulk (i.e., 63%) of the teaching load for the basic course. Full and associate professors, in contrast, accounted for only 24% of the basic course teaching load.

The career focus of the 70's continued into the 80's. Students want to be trained as effective communicators, but they also wanted to be taught to apply these skills to their perspective careers. However, student interest is not the only concern in the 80's. The Laissez-Faire attitude assummed by the college and university administration during the 70's was giving way. Students could no longer enjoy the unbridled freedom to elect courses of their own choosing. Due to declining or at least stabilizing enrollments during 1980-81, departments and colleges formerly oblivious to each other's enrollments were now casting covetous stares at the fixed pool of available students (Williamson, 1981). As a consequence of suffering enrollements, partially caused by an increased interest in professional colleges and a decreased interest in the liberal arts, departments and colleges began scavenging for student credit hours. The healthy enrollments of the basic course in speech communication provided a fruitful hunting ground for those less fortunate.

THE SECURITY OF THE BASIC COURSE

The question commonly asked by those with suffering enrollments is, "Why require, or permit the liberty to elect the basic course in speech communication and ignore a more substantial area like history, philosophy, or psychology?" (Williamson, 1981). According to Williamson (1981), the struggle to secure enrollments has led to four major criticisms of the basic course:

(1) Is the basic speech communication course a solid academic course?

(2) Does the basic course focuses on theoretics to the exclusion of oral communication skills?

(3) Should the focus of the basic course be expanded to include acting, oral interpretation, and parliamentary procedures?

(4) Should the basic course in communication be the only one to satisfy an oral communication requirement?

In the war for student credit hours, Williamson (1981) argues that Speech Communication departments need to develop politically sensitive and pedagogically sound answers to these questions.

Friedrich (1982) offers some initial answers to Williamson's criticisms, in what he calls a first affirmative case in support of basic speech communication as a required course in a university's curriculum. Friedrich's first argument stresses the importance of including speaking and listening skills as a part of a liberal education. In support of this argument Friedrich cites the current student deficiences in effective communication skills and the need to increase students' oral proficiency in educational, organizational and social contexts.

According to Friedrich's second argument, speaking and listening are skills that can be improved with training and practice. Furthermore, an optimal time for this speaking/listening development are the college and university years. Research provides strong evidence of the crucial nature of the college and university years to the development of speaking and listening skills (See Orr, 1978; Ritter, 1981).

Finally, Friedrich argues that speech communication professionals are uniquely qualified to diagnose communication deficiencies and adequately implement the appropriate instructional strategy. Even though, all instructors are capable of noticing deficit communication behavior, these same instructors are not trained to prescribe the most effective remedy. In fact, their cure may result in problems worse than those created by the initial symptoms.

One criticism still remains unanswered: Is the basic course in communication too theoretically oriented? As evidenced by the review of the topic orientations adopted by the basic course, the basic course has historically reacted appropriately to the ever-changing needs of its constituents. The primary topics included in the basic course throughout the years consist of public speaking, voice and diction, the development of supporting material into a speech composition, and, to a lesser degree, techniques of audience analysis. Such topics as oral interpretation, communication history, speech science, parliamentaray procedure, and language were emphasized as relevant components in early courses, but their presence as part of the speech communication course faded from the 1960's to the present. Skills appearing in more recent courses that were not taught in the earlier versions of the basic course include communication theory, principles of reasoning, outlining, and listening. Additional topics receiving limited citation in the literature include: personality adjustment and English composition (1949), radio and phonetics (1950), improvement of everyday speech (1955), remedial speech and semantics (1956); topic selection, motivation, ethics, rhetorical criticism, and interviewing (1970), interpersonal communication and small group communication (1980). A diagram of the different topics emphasized in the basic course is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

By examining the evolution of the basic course, both its philosophy and its emphasis, it should be clear that, historically, the course has adapted appropriately to an ever-changing society. Presently, the basic course

enrollments at a majority of the colleges and universities surveyed are increasing at a faster rate than those reported by the overall institution. It is projected that the content of the basic speech communication will continue to emphasize a career outlook, especially responsive to the oral profeciency requirements and the economic realities of the '80's.

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TABLE 1
TOPICS EMPHASIZED IN THE BASIC COURSE

Course Topics	Year In Which The Study Was Reported							
	1949	1950	1955	1956	1964	1970	1974	1980
Public Speaking		X	X	X	X	X		
Informative Speech						X	X	X
Persuasive Speech				X		X	X	X
Voice & Diction	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Composition	X			X	X			
Supporting Material						X	X	X
Audience Analysis		X		X		X	X	X
Dramatic Skills	X	X						
Delivery					X	X	X	X
Communication Theory					X	X	X	X
Critical Thinking		X						
Reasoning						X	X	X
Discussion & Argumentation	X	X	X	X				
Outlining						X	X	X
Listening					X	X		X
Developing Ideas	X	X						
Communication History	X	X						
Speech Science	X	X						
Language	X							X
Parliamentary Procedure	X		X					
Debate		X		X				
Body Control			X	X				